

[Bea, The Washwoman]

[?] Feb. 27

February 1, 1939

Sarah Hill (Negro)

157 Church Street

Athens, Georgia

Wash Woman

Sadie B. Hornsby

DEE , Bea, THE WASH WOMAN

When I reached Sarah's house, and knocked at the front door, three voices greet me. "Here we is come 'round to the back." I made my way to the back yard, jumping a mud hole in the walk, walking in the grass that mired down every step I took. It had been raining lots that week, however, the sun was shining on that particular afternoon.

In the back yard two negro girls were bending over old fashion wash tubs washing. There were four lines filled with clothes drying in the sun. Sarah was sitting on the porch talking to another Negro woman, I heard her say: "It's too bad he had to get in jail." When she saw me, she said: "Lawdy Mistess, if I had knowed it was a white lady I would have let you come through the house so you wouldn't git your shoes muddy." She called to one of her daughters who was washing. "Ca'Line git that clean pot rag hanging on that chair, and come here and wipe mistessess shoes off for her." I told her that was quite all right I didn't mind a little mud. "Well, that's all right than, but come here and git the lady a chair. 'cuse

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me for not getting up I has been sick in bed with the flues, this is the first day I has been up, and I is [power'ful?] weak. But I couldn't stay in no longer 'cause I had to see that the children was wash the them clothes clean. [Sarah?] [Susan?] , is about five feet tall and is very black, she was 2 wearing a black and white dress of some thin material, a red waist over this, a knee-length black wool coat, a white cloth wound turban fashion around her head, black shoes and gray cotton stockings.

"Yes'um, when us is out here in the yard washing I [?] ain't gwine let Negroes com thro' my house in bad weather tracking up my house." What is your name I asked the woman? "My name is Sarah Hill, but they calls me [Dee?] [?] for short." Sarah [?] , how long have you been washing for the white folks? "Oh, my gracious Mistess, gwine on thirty-five years I am sho! 'bout that." Well, would you mind telling me about your experiences as a washwoman? "Now, Mistess, what in the name of the Lord do you want to know that for?" I stated my mission, she laughed. "Well, if you want a history of my life I can tell you what I knows. Yet and still, I am sho' you can find somebody else what had a better story than me to tell. 'Cause what I knows ain't no 'count you know cullud folks don't have money to do things like white folks does, leastwise us don't.

"I have been working every since I knowed what work was. I maided and cooked befo' I married, I maided a while and cooked a while. After I married and started having chillun I couldn't do no good at working out. So I stayed home and tuk in washing." SARah stopped talking to me to give orders to the girls washing. "Look here sister that sheet belongs in that white sack. Just look at that dirt you got on that man's shirt tail, rub it out befo' it gets dry. Ca'line, git up off them steps and git back to that wash tub. If I don't come out here and stay in behind you you wouldn't finish washing to day." "Well, Ma, I am hungry and you won't <printpgno>3 cook us no dinner." "You finish that washing than you can cook something to eat yourself. That's what I done when you won't big enough to help me."

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"Mistess, I use to git good money for washing. I have made about ten dollars heap of weeks way back yonder. I [?] had a heap of washings than, now - don't git near as much for them as I use to. And folks are lots harder to please. Now I am ready to put them down.

"I am getting too old to do family washings any more. Both of my girls had good jobs, but I won't able to do all my work, so they had to stop, so they could help me. The last white woman sister worked for was a good lady. I done her washing too. I told sister she loved that white lady and her chillun as well as she did us.

"I washed for a family of Jew's who paid me \$4.00 a week. You know how[/ them?] them kind of folks is 'bout wanting you to do their work for nothing. Well, the lady kept cutting me down 25¢ at a time until she got to \$2.00. So I put her washing down. I won't thinking 'bout washing for for that little. She had ten and twelve sheets in wash [?] every week. Twenty and thirty towels, twenty-four pillow cases three and four table clothes and no end to shirts and other things."

She stopped talking to watch two roosters fightning in the yard, while the girls threw rocks at them. She yelled at them: Ca'lina, sister, get back to your washing. Ca'line come in the kitchen and git that startch off the stove and thin it down and stir it good so it wont be lumpy. Sister bring me Professor Yank's socks here and 4 let me turn them. You are gwine to let 'em git mixed with them other folkse's clothes than he will fuss if they are is lost.

"Once I was washing for a family, who I had washed for a long time. After they were ready to be sent home, sister took them. The lady sont me word one of the little boy's shirts was not in the laundry I had sent home. Well, we asked every body we washed for if they had a shirt what didn't belong to them no body had seen it. I reckon sister lost it 'cause she was working for the lady and knowed the shirt was in the wash when the lady got 'em up. So sister had to take her money what the lady paid her for working and buy the little boy a new shirt. That didn't look right in a way, yet and still sister was 'sponsible for them clothes from the house to be washed and tuk 'em back.

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"Yes, mam, I have been working all my life. My mammy and daddy died when I was about three year old. I went to live with my brother and sister-in-law and nursed their chillun. My sister-in-law was a mighty good trainer, she learned me how to clean up good and cook. I knowed better than to leave any cat faces in the clothes when I ironed them. She whupped me many a time 'cause I didn't wash the clothes clean. 'Course I am speaking 'bout when I got big enough to do them things.

"I was borned in Elberton, and have several aunts living there now. My mammy didn't work out none, she stayed home and kept the children. She had a heap of hogs and cows to look after. My Pa was a blacksmith. They lived in Tignall befo' they moved to Elberton. After they died I went back to Tignall to live with my brother. No, mam, I wont big enough to work in the field I 5 when I first went to live with him, I jest worked 'round the house doing what little I could.

"I jest have two girls and two boys one is the cook at the Varsity and the other one is an insurance agent in Flint, Michigan. He come to see me Christmas. My girls maids when I am well enough to do the washings I take in. I don't have but two big family washings and I was for two students. I have been washing for Professor [?] long befo' he married his wife. I don't wash for her, the cook does her washing.

A man came by selling produce, the girl Sarah [?] sister asked her mother: "Lets buy some turnip greens I want some boiled victuals." "You know I ain't got no money, today is Wednesday and I wont have none befo' Sadday when I gets my wash money." "Well, I am going to tell him to charge it. I want a cake too." "No you don't jest get me a half pound of butter." The negress yelled: "Say Mr. Waters does you have any turnip greens?" "No" "Well has you got a cake?" "No," "Well what has you got?" "Us has been washing hard all day and we is hungry." I just have potatoes today." "Huh," said Sarah, "He just wanted me to know he was still selling things and come by here in a empty wagon. That white man

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knows I will pay him when I gets my money Sadday, I ain't never failed to pay him yet and he has been coming 'round here a long time.

Her husband is a preacher, he came about this time, "Mama," he said in a deep voice to his wife: "I was hoping you had dinner ready. I have got to go to a deacons meeting to night, and I want to go down to the courthouse to the trial, therefo' I wanted to eat 6 befo' [I?] left." "Papa, you know I don't feel like cooking and if I don't sit out here and keep sister and Ca'line over the wash tub they won't ever git through." "All right, all right, than I reckon I had better go on down the street and see sister Mary Jones you know she ain't been well for a long time. I am mighty un-easy 'bout her, I am afraid she won't last much longer. She sho' will be missed out of my congregation at the church."

My second visit to Sarah's was made in the pouring rain, when I reached her house which is perched on a high hill. The walk up to the house is red clay. I knocked on the door and a young black girl invited me in. "Come in mistess." she invited. I asked if Sarah was at home, before she could answer, Sarah called "Here I am in here come in to the fire." I entered the room from a narrow hall that had two red scatter rugs on the floor, and a hall stand with a red umbrella resting on it. In the bedroom [?] [? where?] Sarah sat [patching?]. There was an old style wood bed, an iron bed, dresser, several chairs a table trunk and curtains that needed laundering, a much worn rug almost covered the floor.

"Have that chair in front of the fire and dry your foots[,?] sister take mistess coat and spread it over that chair to dry." I asked her if she was ready to finish telling me about herself. "Lawdy, Mistess, I have thought and thought. I was sick when you was here befo' my brother had jest died and I have had a house full of company up 'til last Sunday. I have had so much expense trying to buy something for them to eat and it has been raining so much I couldn't do no good at washing, everything I had thought to tell you has left me. Sister do you reccomember what I told you 7 to keep with so I could tell her? "I cain't remember you told me so much.

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"I ain't collected much money here lately and it takes all I make to pay house rent, and a little something to eat. "Taint nothing left to buy even a pair of cotton stockings with. I did want to have a supper for the church but its been too bad for that. I buy the food and cook it then I let the folks know about it and they come and buy their supper. Sometimes I has a fish-fry, than again I has a oyster supper. I gets 25¢ for every plate sold. After I pay for the food I buy, I turn the rest over to the church. If I don't git to washing I will have to have a supper to git some money for ourselves it looks like.

"I told sister and Ca'line today looks like I will have to hire them out instead of keeping them home to help me. Sister had a chance to work for a lady who has jest come to Athens and gone in business of some kind for herself, but she lived so far from my house I knowed she couldn't git there on time these winter days. Looks like I don't know what I am gwine do for money. Whitt has gone out to find a job, but ain't nobody gwine have no carpenter work done 'til spring 'less they has to. He ought to fix the leak in the kitchen, but the house don't belong to us. Looks like the man what owns it won't fix it no how.

"Sister show the lady the house if she wants to see it." Oh, mama the lady don't want to see the house, she come here to git your story about washing." I would like to see your house. "See there I told you so, [go?] go on and it will give me a chance to think about what I want to say. Right now I can't get my mind off that tub of clothes on the back porch."

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I followed the girl through the hall to the livingroom. There was a three piece jackard valour livingroom suit, a studio couch, dresser, organ, a mahogany library table with a coal oil lamp, books and magazines on it, another table of golden oak with a crochet cover and radio on it. The table was placed back of the divan, pictures of the family as well as others were scattered about on the wall. A heater and rug on the floor completed the furnishings of this room also red draperies with ball fringe and cream scrim curtains at the two windows. "My brother give us that table with the lamp on it when he was here two

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years ago. We don't play the organ any more since we got our battery set radio, unless we have company and they want to play and sing.

"Come in here this is our diningroom." There was a golden oak suit in this room. Round table with a white cloth on it and a cheap glass fruit bowl. On the sideboard were several pieces of glass ware and a vase filled with artificial daisies reflecting in the mirror in the sideboard. Curtains at the window are of scrim a fruit picture on the wall and a curtain stretched across one corner of the room for a closet.

"I hate to take you in the kitchen." said the girl. "It leaks so you might get your feet wet." There was a bucket under the leak in the kitchen. In the small room, was a wood stove, an old dresser used as a cabinet, in large glass jars on the makeshift cabinet, was filled with flower, sugar, meal and lard there was a eating table and over this hung two huge hams and a middling of meat. The girl said: "I sho' wish papa would let us cut one of them hams, but he said we couldn't because they are not to be cut until summer."

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Whitt came in the back door as we were talking about the hams. "Good evening Miss, how do you like the looks of them hams?" Oh, they lood good to me I replied. "Yes, mam, they sho' does, they wouldn't be here now if I let the old woman and the girls have their way. I told them the other day when they wanted to cut one. I won't thinking 'bout it. They had all ready run away with it too fast now." By that time we had gone on the back porch entered into another bedroom which was furnished very much like the other. Bed, piled with clothes to be washed as well as a folding couch, dresser, a few chairs and curtains at the windows. [?] it is a five-room house ceiled with wide boards. The framed house was at one time painted gray. There was a swing on the porch and a [crocker?] sack to wipe muddy feet on. The only shrubbery in the yard was a few bushes of privet hedge planted near the porch. "We sodded the yard in Bemuda grass to keep it from washing." the girl told me.

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Again I went into the room where Sarah sat still patching the pants. "Miss, how did you like them hams?" I think they are fine. Whitt interrupted, "Sarah when we cuts them hams I am going to send Miss a nice thin slice." There are three of us I told him. "Than I will send you three nice thin slices."

"We have lucky about getting washings, its the weather that messes us up. I [got?] \$1.50 for a family washing and 75¢ for one person when I started washing look like I was afraid to start, I was sho' I couldn't please the whitefolks. Than I started at it and I must have pleased the folks 'cause they come to me when I won't expecting them too. That's what I tell Ca'line 'bout getting a job, she is [skaert?] the folks wont be pleased with her work.

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"In bad weather folks don't realize you don't have no way of boiling clothes, 'course we do wash in the house, and rensen the clothes as good as we can, they does git dingy in the winter and you can't help it.

"We use to pay out and have a little left when I made good money. Now I don't pay out and have nothing left either. This house we live in cost us \$8.50 a month, but we has to pay it by the week which cost us more in the end. I pay \$2.25 every week and that makes \$9.00 with 50¢ included for the water.

She spit a mouthful of snuff spiddle into the fireplace. "Ca'line go cut off that radio, I done forgot what I did think of telling the lady go on put that dream book down. All you think about is that dream book and the radio.

"The worst trouble I ever got in was when we lived cross the river on [the?] tother side of town. I had my wash out on the line and they didn't git dry, so I left them on the line that night to dry when I got up next morning every lasting piece of them clothes was gone. Well sir I didn't know what to do, so I ported it to the police. He searched every house on that side of town, and all the time it was us next door neighbor what took them and that was the

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last house the police searched. I washed them clothes and tuk them to the whitefolks, and as soon as I found a house on this side [fo?] town I left that place and I don't think I has ever been back to stay no time.

“[No?] mistess, I sho' don't like these fire places what has grates in them. Long befo' folks got to sticking 'em in every room, I could clean my hath (hearth) nice and sot my irons in front of the fire 11 and iron all day without stopping so long as I had a heap of oak hickory and ash wood to burn, 'twon't no need to put a iron by the fire if you didn't have that kind of wood 'cause they didn't heat and jest git the irons full of smut and one thing I jest hate is to iron with a nasty iron. I have cooked on a fireplace many a time befo' stoves come in fashion, and iron at the same time I have sot up many a night 'til twelve and one o'clock ironing. That is what's the matter with my eyes now. Come here sister and thread my needle. I don't do that no mo' what I don't do in the day time I leave it alone, unless I put sister and Ca'line to work on them. I wish I had electric lights, 'cause you can't do no good at ironing the wrinkles out of clothes by lamp light.

“Since the folks what rents houses stopped up the fireplaces with them grates, us had to use charcoal buckets. I reckon that is what they done it for. Yet and still the buckets don't cost as much as they use to. The first bucket I bought cost a \$1.25 that sho' was a heap of money. Now I can git one for 75¢ and 50¢. It takes about a bushel of charcoal to do the ironing I has now. It cost 20¢ a bushel but I use to pay 25¢ for it. Charcoal is like everything else there is good and bad. Ash charcoal is heaps better 'bout holding heat than pine. I don't use pine if I can help it. The buckets have been in use about fifteen years.

“No, Mistess, us wash women don't make good money no mo' since the whitefolks what use to pay good, all got washing machines and these laundries have open up. 'Bout the onliest folkkses what has washings done now is them what ain't got no machine and can't pay the laundry their price they is the ones what brings their clothes 12 to us and we have

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to do it for mighty near nothing or stop work. It sho' is bad on us what is trying to make an honest living and raise our chillun right.

"All my chillun has fairly good school nothing to brag about, but they talks a heap better than some of the folks do round here. We [is?] all members of the Baptist church. sister here sings in the church choir. Whitt is a preacher, so we do try to live good christian lives. I would like to hire my girls out on good jobs, but folks don't want to pay nothing for your work no mo' if they did than I wouldn't have to work no mo'.

"Well Mistess I have told you all I know about washing I might have thought of lots more to tell you, but since my brother [died?] my mind has been crossed up so I cain't remember what I use to [know?]."

I got up to leave, and Whitt began about the hams. "Miss did I tell you them hams weighs 33 pounds a piece. If you know of anybody that wants carpenter work done, I wish you would pint them out to me. And sent the old lady a washing. Times is might tight. I got to go down to Arnoldsville and get some of my good [white?] friends to sign a paper for me so's I can git the old age pension. I reckon they is living, yet and still I ain't been back there in 40 years."